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ABSTRACT

Radical feminist Andrea Dworkin has been instrumental in efforts to curtail pornography by defining it as a violation of women's civil rights and allowing individual women to sue the distributors for damages. Dworkin's position derives from the tension between "what should be" and "what is." Her conception of the difference between the feminine and masculine nature offers women as the glorious image of what men could be, while men are the dark reminder of what is. For Dworkin, this tension is compounded by the tension between "what is" and "what appears to be." If appearance--that pornography is about sexuality--were truth, pornography would be a liberating agent for both sexes. Dworkin's definition of pornography comes from the ancient Greeks, whose word "porne" meant the lowest class of whore. Her referral to the ancient meaning attributes motive to the purveyors: the subordination of women through the way women are represented, equating them with vile whores. Dworkin further sees pornography as an agency of violence that awakens men's deeply rooted obsession with death, directing it toward women. Even when the image is nonviolent the ideology behind the image must be violent as an expression of the male world vision. Dworkin's rhetoric thus blames men while avoiding questions such as why some men are not drawn to pornography. Instead of finding "male truth" Dworkin has created a radical feminist myth of male truth. Her ultimately unproductive rhetoric allows for no commonality among men and women, and serves only to separate the sexes further. (Notes are attached.) (NKA)

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Andrea Dworkin on Pornography: Exposing "Male Truth"

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A paper presented at the annual meeting of the Speech Communication Association (November 6, 1987)

One of the most prominent voices opposing pornorgraphy in the past decade is that of radical feminist Andrea Dworkin. With attorney Susan MacKinnon, Dworkin was instrumental in several efforts to curtail pornography by defining it as a violation of women's civil rights and allowing individual women to sue the distributors for damages. Her rhetoric concerning pornography has been adopted by many feminists, termed eloquent by the Attorney General's Commission on Pornography, denounced by religious conservatives, and ridiculed by publishers of erotica.[1] Her statements are rarely met with indifference.

Understanding Dworkin's rhetoric concerning pornography provides insight into the radical feminists' view of the relationship between men and women. For Dworkin, pornography is a representative example of how men insidiously oppress women and how oppression is legitimized by pornographic representation of women. For radical feminists pornography both reflects and directs men's beliefs of women's place in society and provides grounds for the denunciation of men. While Dworkin's ideas are certainly not universally accepted by feminists she is an outspoken representative of a segment of women's rights

advocates.[2]

Dworkin's rhetoric is rich in possibilities for the critic. This essay will analyze the dialectic tension between Dworkin's view of reality and her understanding of male truth.

Dworkin and other radical feminists who are opposed to pornography are often passed off as "new censors," "new McCarthyites," or simply "antisex."[3] Such labeling does little to explain the vision of the truth offered in their rhetoric; a vision at odds both with those who find pornography acceptable and with those who object to pornography on moral grounds. For Dworkin pornography is a political statement of the relationship of men and women as well as a symptom of a society that continues to pollute itself with images of hatred and oppression.

Dworkin's position in the pornography debate derives from the tension between "what should be" and "what is." People should be kind, instead they are cruel. All people should be equal, instead there is a social hierarchy, and women are at the bottom. The dichotomy is expressed by Dworkin speaking before a Take Back the Night march in 1978:

> No matter what material or emotional deprivation we have experienced as children or as adults, no matter what we understood from history or from the testimonies of living persons about how people suffer and why, we all believed, however privately, in human possibility. Some of us believed in art, or literature, or music, or

> religion, or revolution, or in children, or in the redeeming potential of eroticism or affection. No matter what we knew of cruelty, we all believed in kindness; and no matter what we knew of hatred, we all believed in friendship or love. Not one of us could have imagined or would have believed the simple facts of life as we have come to know them: the rapacity of male greed for dominance; the malignancy of male supremacy; the virulent contempt for women that is the very foundation of the culture in which we live . . . we are simply overwhelmed by the male hatred of our kind, its morbidity, its compulsiveness, its obsessiveness.[4]

The difference between what should be and what is is also her conception of the difference between the feminine and masculine nature. Women are long suffering but undefeated. They heroically bear their misery and continue to believe in the potential of the future. Their positive outlook may be somewhat naive but is inherently noble. Men, on the other hand, are ignoble, acting on the most base motivations. Women are the glorious image of what could be, men are the dark reminder of what is.

The tension is compounded by the tension between "what is" and "what appears to be." Pornography, according to Dworkin, is an example of the way appearances mask reality. With its

emphasis on genitalia, pornography appears to be about sexuality. If that appearance was truth pornography would be an agency liberating both men and women from Victorian/fundamentalist myths about sex. That appearance, however, only distorts the radical feminist reality of pornography; a reality in which pornography is an agency to subordinate women, reinforcing "the virulent contempt for women that is the very foundation of the culture in which we live."

The tension between the appearance of liberation and the reality of subordination is bound up in the definition of pornography. In general usage pornography is now a rather generic term that has lost much, though not all, of its former negative connotation. For the general public pornography's negative implications appear connected more with the adjectives associated with it. Most acceptable is the soft-core pornography of Playboy; most objectionable is widely available violent pornography and underground child pornography. Pornography has no singular referent. "Part of the problem in any discussion of pornography," says M. Maureen Killoran,

> is that everyone has her own definition of what is being considered. Conceptualizations range from the general category of "sexually explicit materials," to "materials designed explicitly to lead to sexual excitement," to "violence against women," to "that which endorses sexual degradation" with the logical,

> though implicit, extreme being "pornography is that which offends me."[5]

For Dworkin the meaning of pornography, the reality behind the appearance, is inseperable from its purpose. She finds that purpose in the word's ancient roots: "from the ancient Greek _porne_ and _graphos_, means 'writing about whores.' _Porne_ means 'whore,' specifically and exclusively the lowest class of whore, which in ancient Greece was the brothel slut available to all male citizens."[6] Her referral to the ancient meaning offers a meaning for pornography that exposes the intention of the material's creator. If it depicts vile whores it is by definition pornography. Conversely, if it is called pornography it must be presenting women as vile whores. Thus,

> The word _pornography_ does not mean "writing about sex" or "depictions of the erotic" or "depictions of sexual acts" or "depictions of nude bodies" or "sexual representations" or any other such euphemism. It means the graphic depiction of women as vile whores. In ancient Greece, not all prostitutes were considered vile, only the _porneia_.[7]

Her meaning of pornography attributes motive to the purveyors: motivation to subordinate women through the way women are represented; motivation to equate all women with vile whores.

For most people pornography is not infused with such political overtones. Zurcher and Kirkpatrick explain that

"sexually explicit material can be and is invested with valences by individuals in a manner consistent with their overall network of value orientations, socialization patterns, and self-concepts."[8] For most, "porn does not represent action, it represents fantasy."[9] For Dworkin, though, "The most terrible thing about pornography is that it tells male truth."[10] That truth only begins by depicting women as whores.

Male truth, according to Dworkin, further equates pornography with violence against women. She maintains the images in pornography advance the ideology that "women are biologically suited to function only as breeders, pieces of ass, and servants,"[11] that pornography creates a truth in which women are appropriately "dissolved,"[12] and that ideology "does not only sanction violence against the designated group; it incites it."[13]

Dworkin says,

> The fact is that the process of killing--and both rape and battery are steps in that process--is the prime sexual act for men in reality and/or in imagination. Women as a class must remain in bondage, subject to the sexual will of men, because the knowledge of an imperial right to kill, whether exercised to the fullest extent or just partway, is necessary to fuel sexual appetite and behavior.[14]

Pornography is seen as an agency of violence that awakens men's deeply rooted obsession with death and directs it towards women.

It reminds men of how they must treat women if they are to retain their status in the hierarchy.

The relationship of sex to violence and pornography is emphasized by Dworkin who claims

> the eroticization of murder is the essence of pornography, as it is the essence of life. The torturer may be a policeman tearing the fingernails off a victim in a prison cell or a so-called normal man in the project of attempting to fuck a woman to death.[15]

Her truth is male sex is violence and pornography is a weapon used to express that violence.

Gina Allen says violent pornography is "violence against women masquerading as sex. And <u>that</u> is what feminists are protesting. That, not sex, pornography, or erotica, is what feminists are against."[16] Dworkin confirms that statement by drawing many of her examples from violent pornography, yet she extends her vision beyond the obvious violence.

If images of "a woman, nearly naked, in a cell, chained, flesh ripped up from the whip, breasts mutilated by a knife"[17] was Dworkin's only objection to pornography her attacks on pornography would be exceedingly obvious. Explicit violence is only the starting point, however. To Dworkin the elimination of only violent pornography would mean little because "even at its most inane, pornography's basic message is domination, not reciprocity. It defines sex as male aggression and the female

body as a target for conquest."[18] Saying "the fact is that most of what we call pornography deals more with the act of sex and our genitalia than it does with violence"[19] disguises truth for the radical feminist. Even if pornography only dealt with the act of sex, with no explicit violent imagery, it would still perpetuate the prevailing hierarchy and the subordination of women. Male images of sex express a male truth of violent oppression even if that violent oppression is not clearly present.

The relationship between men and women in nonviolent pornography is exemplified in Dworkin's description of photographs depicting two women engaging in sex:

> The camera is the penile presence, the viewer is the male who participates in the sexual action, which is not within the photograph but in the perception of it. . . . The symbolic reality of the photograph--which is vivid--is not in the relationship between the two women . . . the symbolic reality instead is expressed in the posture of women exposed purposefully to excite a male viewer. The ass is exposed and vulnerable; the camera has taken it; the viewer can claim it. . . . The exposed ass is an emblem for the values in the photograph as a whole. The contact between the women does not exclude the male; it explicitly invites him. . . . The photograph is the ultimate tribute to male

> power: the male is not in the room, yet the women are there for his pleasure. His wealth produces the photograph; his wealth consumes the photograph; he produces and consumes the women. The male defines and controls the idea of the lesbian in the composition of the photograph. In viewing it, he possesses her. The lesbian is colonialized, reduced to a variant of woman-as-sex-object, used to demonstrate and prove that male power pervades and invades even the private sanctuary of women with each other. The power of the male is affirmed as omnipresent and controlling even when the male himself is absent and invisible.[20]

The symbolic ominpresence of the male is necessary to the radical feminists' understanding of pornography and society. Without it pornography has no meaning; it is simply depictions of sex or photographs of naked bodies. Without symbolic male omnipresence in society women are victimized by fate; there is no one to blame and no hope for remedy.

Dworkin's description of symbolic reality also illustrates her progression from opposing violent pornography to opposing all pornography as violent. Even when the image itself is nonviolent the ideology behind the image must be violent. It is violent because it expresses the male vision of the world. It is violent because it establishes and maintains a hierarchy in which men subordinate women. For Dworkin that subordination is inevitable

because it is a part of a broader campaign of subordination. "The sexual humiliation of women for fun, pleasure, and profit is the inalienable right of every man"[21] because it supports the prevailing order. The results of that order are unacceptable and its truths must be exposed to be changed.

The truth in pornography, according to Dworkin, is that men are not the inheritors or victims of their culture, they are the creators, perpitrators, and the beneficiaries. Men are not merely indoctrinated in the ideology of the oppressor but are active participants. "The sons," she says, "dispossessed, did have a choice: to band with the fathers to crush the women or to ally themselves with the women against the tyranny of all phallic power, including their own. The sons, faithful to the penis, bonded with the fathers who had tried to kill them."[22] Pornography is central to that participation because "pornography is the propaganda of sexual fascism. Pornography is the propaganda of sexual terrorism."[23] That propaganda is willingly produced and willingly accepted by men who see it as either harmless or of lesser importance than their right to have access to it.

Dworkin's objections to pornography provide a basis for not only opposing sexually explicit materials but also for placing blame for the world's ills on men. Her sweeping generalizations about men, her charges that men hate women, that men want to see women dead, that men's prime interest in life is killing women,

and that men want to use sex as a means of destroying women all provide very stirring rhetoric that places guilt on all men. In so doing she avoids problems such as explaining why some men are not drawn to pornography, why some men do not promote or participate in actual violence against women, and why some erotica is apparently harmless. Her version of "male truth" is such that the absence of violence is hidden violence and conveys the same guilt as actual violence.

Dworkin has not "found" male truth, she has created a radical feminist myth of male truth. As with all myth there is a basis of fact embellished with fiction. Her portrayal of men is as dangerous as the images she alleges pornography presents of women. The acceptance of her myth allows for no commonality among men and women, and no recognition that men can be as caring and as good as women. The acceptance of her position can only serve to further separate men and women. Dworkin's rhetoric may effectively marshall the troops to do battle but ultimately is unproductive as a means to address what is wrong with the social order.

Notes

[1] "Minneapolis Passes Pornography Ban." Chicago Tribune. 31 December 1983: sec. 1, 4. Aric Press, et al. "The War Against Pornography." Newsweek. 18 March 1985: 58. Mary Kay Blakely. "Is One Woman's Sexuality Another Woman's Pornography?" Ms. 13 (April 1985): 37-47, 120-123. Attorney General's Commission on Pornography, Vol. I (July 1986): 769-772. Alan M. Dershowitz, The Best Defense. (New York: Vintage Books, 1983): 191. Hugh M. Hefner. "Sexual McCarthyism." Playboy. 33 (January 1986): 59.

[2] Karen DeCrow, "Strange Bedfellows." Penthouse. May, 1985, 96. Lisa Duggan, The Meese Commission Exposed. (New York: National Coalition Against Censorship, 1986), 26-28. Betty Friedan, The Meese Commission Exposed, 42-44.

[3] Aryeh Neier. "Expurgating the First Amendment." Nation. 230 (21 June 1980): 752. Alan M. Dershowitz quoted in "Women's War on Porn." Time. (27 August 1979): 64. Hefner.

[4] Andrea Dworkin. "Pornography and Grief." Laura Lederer ed. Take Back the Night. (New York: William Morrow, 1980): 287.

[5] M. Maureen Killoran. "Sticks and Stones . . . Feminists and the Pornography Debate." International Journal of Women's Studies. 6 (1983): 443.

[6] Andrea Dworkin. Pornography: Men Possessing Women. (New York: Putnam's, 1981): 199.

[7] Dworkin, Pornography 200.

[8] Louis A. Zurcher, Jr. and R. George Kirkpatrick. Citizens for Decency: Antipornography Crusades as Status Defense. (Austin: U of Texas P, 1976): ix.

[9] Deirdre English. "The Politics of Porn." Mother Jones. 5 (April 1980): 20.

[10] Dworkin, "Pornography and Grief" 289.

[11] Andrea Dworkin. "Pornography: The New Terrorism." New York University Law School Review of Law and Social Change. 8 (1978-79): 216.

[12] Dworkin, "Pornography and Grief" 287. She says, "To be 'dissolved'--by any means necessary--is the role of women in pornography. The great male scientists and philosophers of sexuality, including Kinsey, Havelock Ellis, Wilhelm Reich, and Freud, uphold this view of our purpose and destiny. The great male writers use language more or less beautifully to create us in self-serving fragments . . . The biographers of the great male artists celebrate the real-life atrocities those men have committed against us . . . And in history, as men have lived it, they have 'dissolved' us--by any means necessary.

[13] Dworkin, "Pornography: The New Terrorism" 216.

[14] Dworkin, "Pornography and Grief" 289.

[15] Dworkin, "Pornography and Grief" 288.

[16] Gina Allen. "What Those Women Want in Pornography." Humanist. 38 (Nov.-Dec. 1978): 46.

[17] Dworkin, "Pornography: The New Terrorism" 216.

[18] Robin Morgan. "How to Run the Pornographers Out of Town (and Preserve the 1st Amendment)." Ms. 7 (November 1978): 55+.

[19] Helen Colton. "Update on Pornography." Humanist. 38 (Nov.-Dec. 1978): 29.

[20] Dworkin, Pornography 46-47.

[21] Dworkin, "Pornography: The New Terrorism" 217.

[22] Andrea Dworkin. "Why So-Called Radical Men Love and Need Pornography." Take Back the Night. 153.

[23] Dworkin, "Pornography: The New Terrorism" 217.